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BILLY BOWLEGS

By Oscar Hatch Hawley

IT WAS a long time ago that Billy Bowlegs donned the blue and wrote his signature with "U. S. A" after it. At that time he had given the name of Bill Adkins, and added:

"But ther allus calls me Billy Bowlegs 'ome, 'n I guess that'll do 'ere."

From which it will be observed that he was English, and mutilated his mother tongue with an ardor that would have done credit to an enemy.

"You see, sir," he continued, as the recruiting officer glanced at him dubiously, "I got these 'ere legs grippin' of 'em around a 'orse. So, though they ain't the purtiest things in a man's make-up, they comes in mighty 'andy w'en you're 'ell bent in a tight 'ole."

"Been in the English army?" inquired the officer.

"Oh, yes, sir, certainly; that's what I'm a-tellin' you of."

"What regiment?"

"Northumberland light 'orse."

"Got your papers with you?"

Adkins' face reddened somewhat at the question, but he stood at attention and answered as though he had learned the part by heart:

"Well, you see, sir, we were wrecked comin' 'ome from India, and I lost all me papers. Then I come right away to this country so quick that I didn't 'ave no time to git duplicates. You know, sir, army officers ain't chain lightnin' at gittin'—that is to say, sir, there's w'at you call a 'ell of a lot of red tape, w'ich makes a man sick—of course, that is in the old country, sir. It's different in America, I 'eard, an——"

"All right, all right, Adkins," interrupted the officer, as the would-be recruit got more and more hopelessly entangled in his explanation; "I understand what you mean. Well, if you'll swear allegiance to Uncle Sam, I guess we can use you in the cavalry branch."

Good men were hard to find, and the officer knew from experience that English soldiers answered all requirements. He also knew that many of them who enlisted in the United States Army were deserters from the crown, who had come to America with the expectation of living on the fat of the land, but found the struggle for existence as hard or harder than in their own country, and had drifted to the army, happy at the thought of three square meals a day, even at the expense of the rigid discipline. And they became good soldiers for the United States, because their pay was better, their surroundings healthier, and the life one such as kept a man just busy enough with drills, parades and inspections so that he felt he was earning his money. As men were scarce, their pedigree was not inquired into too closely at the recruiting office. They were enlisted, as long as they looked like promising recruits, over 21 years old and able to read and write.

Thus had Billy Bowlegs come into the service in the long ago, before the Custer massacre, when Indian skirmishes were of daily occurrence on the frontier, and when many a brave fellow dropped from his saddle with a poisoned arrow in his body, and many another became the clown for savages while he was being flayed alive. Billy is probably in the service still, because, like all good soldiers of the regular army, he would not leave until killed or retired on half pay. That is part of their creed, and that is what makes them fighting men—soldiers, who do their duty and never grumble. On a campaign they may be fed today; if not, they will likely get it on the morrow, or the day after. And if they have to fight all day and do fatigue all night, what does it matter? There will come a time when they will neither fight nor do fatigue, and that will even matters up. That is the philosophy of the "regular," and that was Billy's philosophy. He had the pride in the service which is characteristic of all army men who have served more than one enlistment, for he counted himself a defender of the nation, something above the ordinary man, with the suit of blue as a uniform of honor (which distinguished him from his fellow man who lived for mere money), and which must not be disgraced under penalty of being bobtailed from the service—the most terrible punishment that can be meted out to an offender, because, when he is dishonorably discharged, branded as a felon, drummed out of camp, he has no possible chance of reinstatement, and his grip on life is gone.

The name had stuck to him from the day he entered the service, and he was pretty widely known throughout the army because of his roving disposition. He was not satisfied to remain in one regiment long, and when his first enlistment came to an end he had gone into the light artillery, notwithstanding the earnest entreaties of his commanding officer. Billy wanted to see the whole show, as he expressed it, and so he had tried a bit in the infantry, and even had one hard year with the engineers, after which he was transferred to his first love.

"Them's not soldiers," he said, tears in his eyes, when he had begged for his transfer; "them's 'odcarriers, 'n' backwoodsmen, 'n' blacksmiths. I didn't enlist to carry no log chain, 'n', besides, I ain't built for it."

Billy was very glad to get back with the horse brigade, but he had gone through three enlistments since that time and was in the infantry again at the time of the Spanish-American War. After the little flourish of trumpets in Cuba he, with the rest of the Tenth, had spent two years in Fort Sill, and was then transferred to the Philippine service. The regiment had scarcely landed when it was sent against an insurrection in the north of Luzon, and Billy had the trial of his life, marching through snarled chaparral and thick mud, taking an occasional pot shot at some hostile savage along the way, and cursing his luck that he had not remained with the artillery, where he would have had a horse to take the heavy part of the marching.

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The gray fog of a tropical morning was being slowly dispelled as a company of light artillery dragged itself with slow tread up the slope of El Pozo. A short distance in advance was the three-inch fieldpiece, hauled by ten horses, and even then being stuck in the thick clay every now and then. At last they reached a spot and came to a standstill, for there was the circle, left by the engineers the day before, showing the most advantageous spot from which the works along Bontoc Heights could be shelled.

"Looks like a likely hole," commented Captain Grimes, peering around here and there to see what was in the underbrush and if the forest was very thick on the land side. Everything seemed to be satisfactory, and he gave orders to mount the gun and build the brush screen in front so that the enemy could not see the flash.

"Won't make much difference, anyway," he said, carelessly, "but we'd better go through the routine."

"The idea of sending us into the wilderness on an expedition of this kind," sneered the lieutenant. "General Bunnell must have bats in his belfry to imagine that we are needed."

"Yes, and that cracked Simmons stuffing him full of all kinds of stories about this being a hard garrison to fight. 'Disgusting! I guess if we drop about one shell into their works that'll be the end of the game."

"Why, say, he gave him the greatest game of jolly you ever listened to. Said they were officered by Spaniards, and had artillery, and used smokeless powder, and a lot more rot."

The lieutenant was regaining his spirits after the march and was feeling very jolly.

"Rot's no name for it," commented Captain Grimes.

"Gathering up the reins, he quickly had the horses under control, and snatching off his campaign hat he used it for a whip."

"Wish I could have got the ear of the old man. I'd have told him something about this country. But that Simmons takes everything the Maccabees say in dead earnest; relies on 'em as if they were white men."

"Do you suppose they've got anything at all in the shape of a fieldpiece?" asked the lieutenant, mirthfully.

"Likely some old muzzle-loader brought over by the Greasers a couple of hundred years ago. They'll be shooting that at the sun, I'm thinking, until we get a bead on 'em, and then good-bye artillery practice."

The captain laughed good-humoredly. The situation was amusing.

When the fog had lifted sufficiently he took a look through his fieldglass and gave orders to start the bombardment at 8000 yards. As the roar of the first discharge shook the air he turned to the lieutenant and remarked:

"See that smoke? Lucky we're up against a cheap outfit. That would be a beautiful target for a good marksman. Say, how I would like to get a shot at a mark like that."

He was referring to the pall of black smoke which hung above the gun after the discharge, completely shutting from view everything in front.

"H'm," he commented a moment later, as a dull, heavy sound came to his ear. "Do you know, lieutenant, that sounds like——"

"My God!"

With a shriek and roar a shell from the enemy hurtled through the air and burst with terrible force not a dozen yards above the American gun. Flying pieces of metal killed two men and wounded half a dozen others. The company was thrown into a panic. No return had been expected, and the suddenness of the attack took every man unawares.

"Did you see where that shot came from?" shouted Captain Grimes. "I wasn't looking at the time."

"Neither was I," replied the lieutenant, "but I'll get 'em next time they let one of 'em loose."

"Let 'em have another taste of American steel," ordered the captain, "and after the discharge get away from the gun. Keep under cover, now; this looks like business."

A moment later came the return from the enemy, and, although both the captain and lieutenant were on the lookout, they saw no flash, no smoke, and heard only the dull, heavy report when the missive of death was sent on its way.

The second shell from the insurgents exploded under the American gun and turned it over, but no one was killed.

"Quick, here, hook up that gun," commanded the captain. "Yank it out of there as quick as God'll let you."

Then began a series of manoeuvres such as had never before been seen. The team was attached to the gun all the time, and as soon as discharged it was hauled to a new position thirty or forty yards away. In this manner it was impossible for the insurgent gunners to get a bead on the American weapon, and the company, although hard worked, escaped without large casualties.

"Looks some as if the Maccabees were right, after all," shouted the lieutenant on the run between two shots. "Can't see a thing of their gun. They must have it well under cover and using smokeless powder."

"That's the time I underrated the enemy," replied the captain, grimly. "I'd give a good deal to know just where their gun is located."

"Well, if they're using smokeless powder, we can only find 'em by catching the flash."

"You find the flash," returned the captain. "We've got to do it. If we don't the infantry will never be able to take the hill."

"I'll find it if I have to ride right into Bontoc."

The lieutenant called five men as an escort and started on a detour to the west.

With his glasses he had made out a depression in the hill held by the insurgents. It was way around to the left, but he thought that if it were possible for him to gain a point so that he could look through the gap he would be able to see the field in the rear of the insurgent army and thus find the flash of a fieldpiece. It would probably be screened only at the front, and he would be well over their flank.

Lieutenant Gatter worked well, but it was near 11 o'clock when he arrived abreast of the gap. Even then he could distinguish nothing which looked like an artillery ambush. He could plainly see the broad field in the rear of Bontoc Heights, but nowhere in all that expanse did he descry a sign of activity. The terrific duel of artillery continued, while crash after crash of musketry told him that the Tenth was making brave efforts to storm the hill. He could see the boys deployed in the half-dry bed of the river, less than a mile from the crest of the hill, and he could also see the continuous spitting of fire from the heavy works there, which showed that they were not to be taken without a desperate struggle. Where could the insurgent artillery be? That was doing all the damage and completely setting at naught the carefully laid plans of Colonel Regan. Unsupported by their artillery, the insurgents could easily be driven back.

Again he scanned the field, and at last his glass rested on a little rise of ground, more than two miles from where he was standing. The top of that hill was heavily wooded. It would be a splendid place for ambuscade if within the limits of gun fire. Carefully he watched it, and then of a sudden let loose a wild yell and threw his hat in the air.

"There they are!" he fairly shouted. "Did you see that flash?"

The man addressed shook his head, but took the glass and looked at the spot indicated.

"That's the hole, but how are we goin' to git at 'em? That's what I want to know."

"Quick, work the heliograph, sergeant! We haven't time to go back, and, besides, this is the spot to plug 'em from."

"Yes, but if they move off the hill the niggers'll smell a rat."

"No, they won't; they'll think we're out of action, and it'll be a most beautiful surprise when we drop a twelve-pounder under 'em and send 'em skyward."

The reflectors were quickly brought into play, and in less than a minute had caught the answer from Captain Grimes.

"Have located enemy's fieldpiece," read the captain. "Hurry here. You can put them out of action P. D. Q."

"Hurry there, eh?" said Captain Grimes, reading the message. "Well, how 'n hell we're to hurry anywhere in this underbrush is something of a mystery. However, I guess the boy knows what he is talking about, and we'll get there some time before dark."

Without a moment's hesitation the order was given to take the trail down the hill, follow the infantry path and see if some way could not be found to break through the underbrush on the level, instead of climbing along the side of the mountain. With the exception of the mounted men, the company was to follow as rapidly as possible. Those attached to the squad and the half dozen on horseback were to keep near the gun.

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The fighting of the morning had been hot and continuous. At 10 o'clock the men of the Tenth lay along the bed of the Malatan river, where they had deployed, and were waiting for the order to advance again. Over their heads poured a continuous hail of bullets, and it was as much as a man's life was worth to raise his head above the low embankment. They knew where the enemy lay. They had seen the long rim of flashing fire on top of the ridge, and they knew that that was the objective point of the day's work.

With many groaning curses, Adkins had managed to keep pace with his fellows, and now found himself nearly exhausted, as he lay panting on the sand and cobblestones.

"Here, Billy, get out of this," shouted Colonel Regan, as he edged along under the embankment. "Take my compliments back to Major Killgore and tell him that we want that supply train up with the regiment before midnight, even if the engineers have to carry it here in pieces."

"Ay, ay, sir," answered the Englishman, as he slid down and made his way across the shallow river.

Billy always said "Ay, ay" in answer to a command. He never learned the "Very well, sir," which is the formula used by all regulars.

So Billy started crawling along the path over which he had come but a few minutes before on the run. When he was out of the zone of bullets he raised himself to a standing posture and walked along slowly. He did not know why he had been singled out to go to the rear, when there were lots of "rookies" who would be glad of the chance. As it was, he would miss all the good fighting which was sure to take place when the Tenth charged the hill, as they surely would do some time in the course of the day. He thought it was a shame that he, an old soldier, one who had been in Indian fights innumerable, should have been singled out to carry a message to the rear. Now, if he had been asked to carry a message along the line or in front of the line, or somewhere within the range of fighting, he would have considered it a great honor.

"My good 'eavings!" he exclaimed, vehemently, "if I'd only stayed with th' reds w'en Capting Grimes asked me to. An' they've been 'aving the time of their lives this morning, too. Nothing but shootin' all the morning."

"Zip, zip."

The whistle of two or three bullets near at hand made him glance up apprehensively. As he did so he saw a bright flash of light more than a mile away on his right, and he paused to watch it.

"Looks like a 'eliograph," he mused, keeping his eye on the continuous flashing. "Some niggers, I suppose, tryin' th' game. Next thing we know they'll be 'avin' war balloons, an——"

"'G-r-i-m-e-s,'" spelled Billy, as the mirrors flashed; "wonder w'at 'G-r-i-m-e-s' spells in nigger talk. An' 'e's keepin' of it up, too. 'G-r-i-m-e-s,' jest as if he was callin' some one. 'G-r-i-m-e-s,' w'y, 'ell! that spells Grimes—Grimes, my old capting. Maybe it's a call for 'im."

And Billy, his blood suddenly flowing through his veins with unwonted activity, watched El Pozo to see if there was a reply. Sure enough, it came very quickly.

"O-K, O-K, O-K."

Then Billy knew it was a communication between two parts of the company, and he looked on fascinated while he read:

"Have located enemy's fieldpiece. Hurry here. You can put them out of action P. D. Q."

"O-K," came the reply.

"So Grimes is goin' over that way," murmured Billy, despondently. "Oh, 'ell! I wish I was with 'im."

He walked along with head bent, thinking of the indignity that had been heaped upon him without cause. For the first time since entering the service he felt that he would like to get out of it. Well, never mind; only a couple more enlistments, and he would be done, free to go where he pleased.

He was thinking along this line, feeling very disconsolate and dejected in spirits, when the clatter of galloping horses broke on his ear.

"Sounds like an artillery team," he said, aloud, looking up.

He could see the path a long way ahead of him. It was occasionally hid from view by depressions in the road, but the course of the trail was plainly marked. Suddenly, 200 yards away, the horses came into view. They were on the gallop and coming like mad, the riders urging them on with whip and spur. The leader, a beautiful brown gelding, seemed to have the spirit of the movement in his stride, and plunged along, with mane and tail streaming in the breeze.

"Lordy, but wouldn't I like to 'ave the 'andlin' of that 'orse," ejaculated Billy, as he stopped in the path and watched the running team with admiration, regret and envy.

"Of course, I ain't wishin' you any bad luck, young feller," he said, in an offhand way, as if addressing the rider of the gelding, "but if you should happen to git 'urt at this 'ere particular moment an' need a substitute I'd be mighty glad to act."

Even as he spoke, the rider threw his quirt into the air and put his hand to his throat. He swayed in the stirrups, clutched at the saddle horn and then fell between the horses, to be trampled under foot and crushed by the heavy wheels of the cannon.

"Too bad," was Billy's only comment, as he stepped to the side of the path and made ready for a spring.

The ten-horse team was only fifty yards away and coming without attempt being made to stop, in order that the saddle of the leader might be filled. It was too dangerous a spot in which to tarry. Sharpshooters were on every side, although most of them had been left in the rear, but undoubtedly it was one of their bullets which picked off the rider of the gelding.

Billy had forgotten his message to Major Killgore, he had forgotten his imaginary wrongs, he had forgotten everything, except that the lead horse in the artillery team was riderless, and unless some one gave him a guiding hand very soon he would stumble, and the whole team would be tangled in a bad mess. As they swept past he made a short run and spring and vaulted into the saddle of the leader as lightly as if on parade. Gathering up the reins, he quickly had the horse under control, and snatching off his campaign hat he used it for a whip.

"Good for you, Billy, boy," shouted Captain Grimes, as he rode alongside. "When I saw you spring into the saddle I said that it could be no one but Billy Bowlegs."

"Ay, ay, capting," answered the erstwhile infantryman.

"Slue to the left, first opening you see," continued the captain, at the top of his voice. "Got to——"

"Ay, ay, sir; I seen the 'eliograph."

"What do you know about heliographing?"

"Three years in th' Signal Corps, sir, under Capting Finley."

"Then you know where we're bound?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

Ten minutes later the team plunged into the river and across to the opposite shore. Adkins headed downstream, and, with the cannon and limber sometimes in the water and sometimes on the half-dry shingle, they cut a pace that made the infantrymen howl with delight.

"Go it, boys!" yelled Colonel Regan, at the top of his voice, while cheer upon cheer rent the air. Then, as he watched the vanishing team, he thought the form of the first rider seemed familiar, and wondered in a vague sort of way where he had seen the man before. The thought did not take tangible form; it was merely a fleeting, sub-conscious impression. And yet, a few days later, when the scene had been recalled to mind, the whole picture flashed through his brain, and he then recognized his messenger whom he had sent in search of the supply train.

As the artillerymen came thundering from under cover of the embankment three-quarters of a mile downstream they were discovered by the insurgents, who at once opened a hot fire. It was now plunge and dash in a storm of bullets, with no chance of pulling the team through without some of the horses and men being killed and wounded. But Billy did not allow the whistling missiles of steel to distract his attention. He had business on hand, and knew that very likely on him depended the success of the movement. Leaning over, he glanced under his arm and saw that three saddles were vacant, while two horses were plunging in a manner which told better than words that they had felt the sting of Mauser bullets.

Behind him Captain Grimes was shouting orders in a high falsetto voice, but he could not distinguish them, and was not listening very intently, anyway. His brain was actively working out some plan of salvation, and, although a dozen schemes came to mind in half as many seconds, he saw but one thing to do. With a quick turn, he headed across stream, straight for the thick brush on the opposite bank. He did not know how thick it was, or how far it extended. That made no particular difference. He must get under cover at once or the artillery would never be any use to the poor boys who lay sweltering in the river bottom. To fail now might mean the disastrous defeat of the regiment.

The leaders went at the chaparral without flinching. It broke, it gave, and they were through a thin hedge in far less time than it takes to tell it. As they went through what was Billy's surprise to find himself in a narrow roadway which appeared to be skirting the river. Down this they turned, completely hidden from the enemy. It was well, for his horse was blowing painfully, the others were whinnying or snorting, and three men who had clung to the limber were cursing and crying with rage. He heard the captain shouting to hold up, but he knew that to stop then meant that the team would never be able to start on again. So, with voice and hat he urged them on, little doubting that a few hundred yards at most would bring them to the point from which the heliograph signals had been sent.

"Well, if you'll swear allegiance to Uncle Sam, I guess we can use you in the cavalry branch."

He had not gone far when he heard a bugle in the distance blowing. Listening intently, he heard the familiar old rally call:

"Come a l o n g! Come along! Come along!"

Then he knew he was near the end of his journey, and let out whoop after whoop, like a Comanche Indian, a feat he had learned on the plains. A moment later he dashed into view of Lieutenant Gatter and his squad and brought the team to a standstill with a round turn. As he did so, the beautiful brown gelding sank to the ground, dead from exhaustion. But there was no time to look over wounded horses or men then, and within a minute the gun had been trained on the insurgent ambuscade. With the first shell the artillery of the enemy was put out of action. Captain Grimes divided his attention between the insurgents on the hill and the artillerymen in the rear. As he was on the flank of the enemy, he could enfilade them with terrible results, and in less than an hour they were fleeing to the rear, with the Americans in pursuit.

After Bontoc Heights had been taken Billy sought out Captain Grimes and said:

"Well, capting, I think as 'ow I will continue my journey."

"Th' hell you say," replied Captain Grimes, almost savagely. "Where you going?"

"Well, you see, sir, I'm acting as messenger for Colonel Regan, an' I 'ave a word to say to Major Killgore."

"Oh, I see. Well, in that case I'll say good luck to you, old boy, with the hope that your underpinning will be as valuable to Colonel Regan as it has been to me this day."

"Don't mention such small matters," replied Billy, blushing like a schoolgirl.

"No, I won't say anything more about it, only this: When your enlistment's up I want you to come back here where you belong."

"Thanks, very much, capting. I thought I would like it myself this morning, but that bit of work was a eye-opener. I see I ain't as young as I was twenty years ago, an' so I guess I'll stick to the mud pluggers."

And he did.